

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, January 30, 2002
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"My Commitment to Continue Fighting for Veterans"

By Congressman Allen Boyd

Recently, The News Herald ran an editorial concerning Congress and military retiree issues such as military health care and concurrent receipt. At a time when we are sending our military forces into harms way, I would like to take a moment to reflect on past treatment of our veterans and military retirees, and to look ahead to what is to come in this session of Congress related to these issues.

Last year saw the commencement of two new health care related programs for military retirees. A prescription drug benefit for all military retirees took effect on April 1, 2001, and on October 1, 2001, the TRICARE for Life program began. This program allows military retirees over 65 to keep TRICARE as a supplement to Medicare, just like elderly civilian federal retirees can keep their Federal Employee Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) as a supplement to Medicare. Before the TRICARE for Life program began, I held seminars throughout the district for military retirees to ensure that questions and concerns were answered.

The beginning of the TRICARE for Life program was a good first step toward keeping the promise to America's military retirees and their families for lifetime access to health care benefits. However, recognizing that our military retirees and their families were promised access to the military health care system for life, I have once again cosponsored, and worked for, the enactment of H.R. 179, the Keep Our Promise to America's Military Retirees Act. This legislation would permit military retirees and dependents over age 65 the option of coverage under the Federal Employees Health Benefits program [FEHBP], the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the uniformed services, or the TRICARE Program.

As a freshman Member of Congress in 1997, I thought these problems could be easily rectified based solely on the merits of maintaining our commitment to those who fought in defense of American ideals. However, I soon learned the harsh realities associated with the uphill battle of reversing the nation's 30-year, destructive trend of spending beyond its means. In addition, fiscal restraints are not the only obstacle I have encountered. Today, there is a new mood among some Members that is insensitive to the needs of our veteran population. Some attribute this to the fact that never before has Congress had so few Members with military service. Whatever the reason, I was saddened that Congress did not take the opportunity as part of the

Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2002 to at least stop the practice of deducting Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability payments from military retirement checks.

A 19th century law requires retired wounded veterans receiving disability compensation to waive their retirement pay. They are currently the only federal service employees required to do so. Under the current system, the only way a disabled veteran can receive their normal retirement funds is to forgo their disability payments.

This unfair treatment is why I am a cosponsor of H.R. 303, legislation that would eliminate the current offset and provide veterans with over 20 years of service the ability to collect disability and retirement pay, concurrently, from the VA. Once again, our nation finds itself calling upon the members of the U.S. Armed Forces to defend democracy and freedom. I have no doubt that these brave men and women will rise to the challenge. However, for those who have selected to make their career in the U.S. military, many face an unknown risk. If they are injured, they will be forced to forego their earned retired pay to receive disability compensation. In effect, they will be paying for their own disability benefits from their retirement checks.

I believe it is time for Congress to show our appreciation to the men and women who have sacrificed so much for our great nation. Therefore, I co-authored a letter to the members of the House and Senate conference committee for the Fiscal Year 2002 National Defense Authorization Act that was signed by 144 of my House colleagues. This letter urged the inclusion of the strongest possible concurrent receipt provision in the conference report. Unfortunately, the final agreement on this issue did not go far enough in my view. The bill allows military retirees to receive disability pay without a reduction in retirement pay, only if the President submits legislation to fund this, and only if Congress passes legislation, to specifically pay for the costs of this initiative.

I believe the bill defers on the promises made to disabled veterans. Instead of helping disabled veterans now, the bill holds out the empty promise that maybe Congress will help these brave men and women in the future. Therefore, I have written to President Bush urging him to include the appropriate language in his Fiscal Year 2003 Budget request, that is anticipated in early February, to finally eliminate this discriminatory practice against retired members of the U.S. military.

Clearly, we are facing severe challenges when addressing veterans issues. We must continue work to protect current programs, streamline for cost reductions, and prioritize spending to

ensure funds are directed to those most in need. In addition, we must improve communications between our nation's veterans and the government officials who serve them. I am eager to take up these and many other challenges in this new session of the 107th Congress. I look forward to hearing from the citizens of North Florida in 2002, and I hope that you all have a happy and prosperous new year.